



LARRY PHILLIPS

Chair

Metropolitan King County Council

August 31, 2006

Sam Reed
Secretary of State
Washington State Legislative Building
P.O. Box 40220
Olympia, WA 98504-0220

Dear Secretary Reed,

Thank you for your August 10, 2006 letter supporting a charter amendment making King County's chief of elections an elected position. I appreciate and welcome your views on this matter, however, I respectfully disagree.

Since the Charter's inception in 1969 by a vote of the people, an appointed elections director has served the people of King County quite well. Changing to an elected position, especially now, would be a mistake, for the following reasons:

- 1) **The original charter provisions make sense.** Those creating King County's original charter reviewed which offices should be elected and which appointed. They determined that policy makers should be elected and that technicians and managers, who implement policies, should be appointed. For that reason, offices like the coroner and auditor were made appointed positions. This prevents the politicization of those offices responsible for implementing policies.
- 2) **There is an established process to review the charter which is already underway.** The original creators of the county charter required regular review by citizens of the charter at least once every 10 years. The King County Council voted in May to have the citizens' charter review commission review whether the auditor should be elected or appointed and whether a proposal to make it elected should be put on the ballot for voters' consideration. I support this process and do not wish to see it pre-empted
- 3) **An elected auditor cannot be held immediately responsible for mistakes.** The Executive can fire an appointed auditor immediately, and has done so. An elected auditor can only be held accountable every 4 years. If we had an elected auditor in 2003-2004 we wouldn't have had the option of getting someone new until his or her term had expired.
- 4) **Even if we wait until 2009, we still run the risk of losing a talented professional.** King County is currently negotiating to hire a highly qualified, credentialed elections director, one who has achieved success in running county elections departments. Making the position an appointed one runs the risk of discouraging the future director from committing to the position. And if he does take the job, we lose the opportunity to keep him in 2009, thus throwing away good management. As it is, the issue will remain hanging until 2009 making the job of whoever fills the office more difficult in the interim and adding instability to the division.

- 5) **The director of elections should be a professional not a politician.** I want the director of King County's elections to run an effective, efficient, trustworthy system. The director should not be someone who worries about his or her own re-election campaign while running an elections department. Nor should it be someone who gains the office through a politicized campaign, instead of through a review of professional credentials by an elected body.
- 6) **Finally, it is not necessarily true an elected elections manager provides a stronger voice for the division's budget, staffing, equipment, and space.** The county's recent experience under an appointed official confirms that just the opposite is true. The budgets for other county elections/auditor functions across the state of Washington have all seen marginal gains, or even losses over the past several years, due to severe financial constraints. By contrast, King County's election budget was increased from \$8.6 million to \$11.8 million over the past three years (not counting additional grants from federal and state sources), and 13 new FTE's were added, a 36% increase. All this at a time of King County's worst fiscal crisis. Our appointed elections officials have done exceedingly well in advocating for additional resources, especially in comparison to their elected counterparts.

Thank you again for contacting me with regard to this issue. I know we both agree that a professionally run and politically neutral elections office is essential to the health of any democracy.

Sincerely,



Larry Phillips, Chair
Metropolitan King County Council